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The Rise and Fall of the Rabbit Empire

What animal routinely hunted in Washington for nearly a century does not come under the jurisdiction of the Game Department? This isn't a trick question, either. There's no foolin' around with the words "hunted" or "animal." It's an animal that has provided plenty of sport for many hunters and one that makes great table fare.

There's a clue, of course, in the title of this piece, that should point you in the right direction, but we're not talking about just any rabbit. As I hope you know, the Game Department does regulate hunting seasons for wild rabbits such as the white- and black-tailed jack, the snowshoe hare and the ubiquitous cottontail. (There are several kinds of cottontails; the ubiquitous is just one of them.)

But there is a bunny in Washington for which the Game Department claims no jurisdiction, for the simple reason that it's not classified as wildlife. The San Juan rabbit is a domestic breed that has returned to a feral state, and so it is not truly "wild."

The State Game Department has only a passing interest in the San Juan rabbits, mainly from a biological standpoint concerning their effect on the habitat and competing wildlife. Since the San Juan rabbit is considered a domestic animal that's been turned loose, it is legally the property of the landowner on whose holdings the animals live. Because of this, no action can be taken by the department to prohibit their export or sale. Al-

though many people still mistakenly call the department asking about rabbit hunting in the islands, the San Juan rabbits are not game animals and not within the authority of the Game Department.

Hunting of these rabbits is controlled by county ordinance, and so the enforcement authority rests with the San Juan County sheriff's office. While it's not as popular as in years past, rabbit hunting is still allowed in the islands. For the past couple of years, however, written permission from the landowner has been required. Since nearly all the land outside the national historic park on San Juan Island is privately-owned, if you don't have written permission, you're out of luck. Hunting within the park is definitely not allowed.

All of this is more or less of an introduction to a critter that has most assuredly had its ups and downs, and since right now appears to be one of the "downest" times of all, the question of hunting seems downright moot.

Given the present low numbers of San Juan rabbits hopping about, it's hard to believe that not too many years ago there was national concern expressed over the exporting of these bunnies to other states, for fear of creating a "bunny boom." In 1955, the *GAME BULLETIN* carried an article that tried to quiet those concerns.

Washington's San Juan Island bunnies have achieved national notoriety if not fame, and apparently do not multiply as

fast as the misgivings of various persons in the eastern part of our country, according to several news items recently perused. Under the assumption that these once domestic creatures will increase into devastating numbers if introduced into new habitat areas, with probably disastrous results upon our nation's food supply, well meaning persons have asked this state to prohibit the export of these rabbits to other states.

The article pointed out that there was nothing new in the exporting of the San Juan rabbits, that it had been going on since the 1920s, with no visible effect on the nation's larder. There had been many efforts to transplant the San Juan rabbits to other sections of Washington with no evidence of their multiplying into alarming numbers.

Why all this concern over an innocuous, innocent-appearing herbivore? To understand that we have to take a little broader look at the San Juan rabbit and how it carved a unique niche for itself in the annals of Washington's animals.

The San Juans are scattered over 500 square miles in the area where the Strait of Juan De Fuca and the Strait of Georgia meet. There are about 200 islands and islets in all, with most of them heavily timbered and rocky. Only on San Juan Island, one of the two largest in the group, are there substantial areas of open meadow or grassland, just right for rabbits.



The San Juan rabbit is a mixture of several domestic breeds. The state Game Department is interested mainly in its effect on habitat and on competing species. (National Park Service photo.)

The first recorded bunny boom, or boomlet, since it occurred on an islet, happened shortly after the turn of the century. A lighthouse keeper on Smith Island, a sparsely-vegetated, overgrown sand pile about five miles from its nearest neighbor, introduced some European rabbits to bolster his food supply and his income. The first ones he proudly brought ashore were so-called "Belgian hares," they were soon followed by some black Flemish rabbits and other domestic breeds. Soon there were almost more rabbits than island on Smith Island and the lighthouse keeper saw the light. He called for help.

The rabbits' food supply had rapidly shrunk to nothing, and the usual symptoms of over-population prevailed: severe malnutrition and the spread of disease. There just wasn't any other choice, so wholesale poisoning of the rabbits was undertaken with the help of the U.S. Biological Survey in 1924, leaving few, if any, rabbits on Smith Island.

Rabbits much like those on Smith inhabited many islands of the San Juan group by this time, and they were considered quite common on San Juan Island proper by 1895. These rabbits are believed to have originated with rabbit

breeders who came to the island about 1880, on the heels of the soldiers and settlers who had cleared the land and provided habitat for the bunnies when the breeder's businesses went bust.

Between 1895 and 1940 or so, the rabbit populations in the islands fluctuated widely. The rabbits were almost wiped out in the hard winter of 1916, but they boomed again in the 1920s. A few years later, another enterprising rancher established a rabbitry on San Juan Island that contained several popular domestic breeds, including the golden and Jersey giant varieties. When the rabbit rancher's venture folded in 1934, he thoughtfully released between 2,000 and 3,000 of the domestic munchers to run wild. This release is generally credited with forming the basis for the subsequent rabbit explosion on San Juan Island. By the late 1930s, the rabbits had pretty well established their superiority in numbers over domestic stock and wildlife on the island.

During the 1940s, '50s and in many subsequent years, over 50,000 rabbits were estimated to have been taken annually on San Juan Island, with at least 10,000 of them shipped live to all parts

of the United States. In addition to hunting them during the day, a favorite method of gathering rabbits by the local citizens was chasing them down at night in old cut-down jalopies or dune-buggies, then scooping them up in long-handled nets.

Noting that there were no limits, no seasons and no license required, outdoor recreation guides of the era typically called attention to rabbit hunting on San Juan Island as "probably the best shooting in the nation for this species of game." Nominal daily use fees were usually charged by landowners for hunting privileges on their land.

Today's San Juan rabbit is a mixture of several different domestic breeds with some varieties of color still showing up from time to time, although basic gray is the standard model. Generally, ones taken recently have weighed from four to five pounds each, although average weights of three to six pounds have been variously reported in earlier years. Their meat makes excellent eating, and at one time, local residents killed the rabbits and pickled them in brine for future delicacies.

To further leaf out their family tree, you should know that the European rab-



bits that inhabit the San Juans are descendants of a species that evolved in Spain. Even the Belgian hares that played a role in the beginnings of this rabbit tale were just rabbits, and not hares at all. Hares are different from rabbits in that they are born with fur and gain independence from their mother much sooner than rabbits. Rabbit young are called "kittens," by the way, and the adults are bucks and does.

The Belgian hares, Flemish, Dutch and English rabbit varieties that we know today stemmed from that original wild rabbit of Spain, just as domestic cattle have all been carefully bred from one original species.

Because of their prodigious appetites and amazing ability to reproduce when free from predators, the European rabbit is seen as a threat by many farmers. Few deer can exist near the rabbit warrens on San Juan Island because the rabbits browse on new growth and nearly wipe out any production of shrubs or young trees. This is the same species, remember, that overran Australia and New Zealand and still presents a costly and ever-present problem there today.

Although the San Juan rabbits have apparently adapted very well to their present habitat, they have had a noted lack of success in transplants elsewhere. The nearly complete absence of predators on the islands in former years is credited with at least part of their success there, but man the hunter brought in what has become the rabbits' most efficient predator. Ferrets were used by hunters because they could enter the rabbit warrens and drive their prey into the open. Some of the ferrets escaped and formed the basis for the current small population on the island.

Over the years, the San Juan rabbits have proven to be remarkably hardy and free of disease and parasites. While hunters and road traffic take their toll of the rabbits, and others die of weather extremes, the most important factors in controlling their numbers seem to be a sort of self-imposed breeding limitation coupled with very poor survival of young rabbits. When a warren becomes overcrowded, the young and weak are forced outside where they are more likely to die from weather or predation. Besides the ferrets, several other natural predators play a small part in keeping the population down.

What's happening now with the rabbit population in the San Juans? It

appears that one of the drastic downward swings of the population is at its lowest point. Research conducted during the past few months indicates that the small number of rabbits now inhabiting San Juan Island are unable to reproduce enough to offset the other factors working against them.

In the study conducted this year on the national historic park grounds, a survey of one specific area showed a rabbit count of 400, compared to 1,000 to 1,500 on the same grounds last year and a historic average of 10,000 to 15,000 in 1978 and earlier. The researcher concluded that the present population was dying of old age, with the youngest in the group from four to five years of age.

The great decline in rabbits in the San Juans began about 1980, but the report says the rabbits are obviously trying to stage a recovery and could very possibly succeed.

The San Juan rabbits have been down before and they've come back. The odds are pretty much in favor of the rabbits, judging from their history in the islands and elsewhere. It could be that in a few years we'll once again be hearing dire warnings about exporting a "plague of rabbits." Like many other small mammal populations, the rabbits' numbers seem tied to an invisible see-saw and we

can only guess how high or low it will go. There seems little doubt that the rabbit empire on the San Juan Islands will rise again. □

Game's New Deal

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term in the forties. It is a system unique in the annals of state game commissions throughout the nation, and the selections have consistently been of high calibre, eliminating any stigma of partisan control of the department and the hiring of political hacks.

Remember this one point well — the sportsmen created the Washington State Game Department as it exists today. And most of us are proud of it. We sought no monetary rewards of any kind in crusading for it. And I cannot think of a single individual connected with the original movement who was directly benefited dollarwise as a result of it.

There are always new issues to be resolved, but working together, today's enlightened sportsmen and state conservation agencies can achieve success in our common goals — but, by following the pattern of an earlier era, only disaster can result. □

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